

BLM News

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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2006 Pre Fire Season #3

THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

“Over 95% of all wildfires in Northeastern Nevada are stopped before they reach 10 acres,” said Jeff Arnberger, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Elko Field Office Assistant Fire Management Officer. “The reason for high rate of stopping wildfires early is called Initial Attack.”

“Typically, BLM has 10 engine crews, a Type I Hotshot Crew, and a helicopter with 9-person crew available to respond to wildfires,” Arnberger continued. “When you combine all the resources that Nevada Division of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, Community Fire Departments, and Volunteer Fire Departments bring to the table – there are a lot of people and equipment ready. In addition to these local resources, we have an interagency nationwide mobilization system that allows us to request and receive additional crews and equipment from around the nation to assist us when our local resources are stretched thin.”

Nevada Division of Forestry Acting Regional Forester Tom Turk remarked, “Given our isolated communities and large landscape, the Volunteer Fire Departments are the front line of protection for rural communities in northeastern Nevada. There are about 35 fire departments in Elko, Eureka, and White Pine Counties – both paid fire fighters and volunteers. There are about two volunteer firefighters for every one full time professional. All in all, Northeastern Nevada has a good partnership with the full time and volunteer fire fighters. Our success is dependant on quick attack forces which hub out of each community.”

BLM Elko Fire Management Officer Joe Freeland commented, “One of the challenges fire fighters have in Northeastern Nevada is managing multiple fires. We’ve had situations when a fast moving lightning storm has blown through Elko County and left 30 fires in its wake scattered across a 100-mile-long, 50-mile-wide swath. It can get hectic and resources can be stretched thin. Prioritizing which people and equipment are dispatched to which fire is a challenge in itself.”

“To meet that challenge, fire managers from the Nevada Division of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, and BLM form a Multi-Agency Coordinating Group or the ‘MAC’ who’s sole purpose is to prioritize fires and available resources,” Freeland added. “Typically representatives from Elko County participate as well. The three priorities are always Human Life/Safety, Property, and Resources in that order.”

“Fire fighter safety is our number one priority. While we do our absolute best during fires to protect property and rangeland resources, we will not jeopardize our fire fighters. No amount of land is worth a single human life. Fire fighting is dangerous work. We have very strict safety rules governing work to rest ratio. That ratio is for every 16 hours worked, fire fighters must rest for 8 hours.”

“Unfortunately, our work-to-rest rules have led to some misunderstandings,” Freeland continued. “Every year we hear the ‘If only they [meaning BLM, NDF, Forest Service, or volunteers] had done whatever, they would have stopped that fire right then.’ We also hear ‘I drove by the fire camp and they were all just standing around doing nothing’ or ‘That bull dozer sat there for hours when it was needed to control the fire.’ Those comments invariably circulate through the community and often times they are based on a lack of understanding of the specific situation. If people stopped to talk to the fire fighters who are ‘doing nothing’ they might find out that the fire fighters just came off a 16-hour shift saving property. Or they might find out they just woke up after being up all night fighting fire and protecting homes. We ask that people give our fire fighters the benefit of the doubt or ask questions before spreading rumors,” Freeland concluded.

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Note to editors – This is the third in a series of 4 articles dealing with the coming fire season. The final story in the series include information about how to report wildfires and what to do if a fire does come near homes.